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Speaking at Cross-Purposes? The Rhetorical Problems of ‘Progressive’ Politics

Emily Robinson and Joe Twyman¹

Abstract

On 22 January 2009 David Cameron launched the ‘Progressive Conservatism Project’ at Demos, a think tank previously associated with the centre-left. He made clear that he considered this a new departure both for the Conservative Party and for the country. His words were widely interpreted as an attempt to distance the party from Thatcherism and to move towards values more usually associated with the Lib-Lab ‘progressive tradition’ in British politics.

This article questions the efficacy of this rhetorical strategy in reorienting voters’ impressions of the Conservative Party. It uses a 2012 YouGov/University of Nottingham survey to show that the word ‘progressive’ is not well understood by the British public. A plurality of survey respondents felt unable to define the word, and those who did tended to use politically neutral terms such as forward-movement, improvement and change. Very few defined it in terms of liberalism, left politics or social justice. Moreover, while many respondents did view Conservative politicians as ‘progressive’, they included Margaret Thatcher within this.

The idea of ‘progressive conservatism’ might have seemed attractive to voters in that it signified optimism and change. However, for the majority, it is unlikely to have indicated a shift to the left.

Keywords

Progressivism, rhetoric, public opinion, progressive conservatism, David

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Cameron

I

On 22 January 2009 David Cameron launched the 'Progressive Conservatism Project' at Demos, a think-tank previously associated with a centre-left political agenda. He made clear that he considered this a new departure both for the Conservative Party and for the country - a 'powerful idea' which involved using 'conservative means' to achieve the 'progressive ends' of creating a fairer, more equal, greener and safer society (Cameron, 2009: 2). This clearly followed the path taken by Cameron since his election as Conservative Party leader; he was attempting to 'decontaminate' the party's image through 'a series of counter-intuitive initiatives and [...] unapologetic raids on Labour and Lib Dem territory' (Bale, 2011: 381). As Robert Page explains elsewhere in this volume, the turn to this form of socially 'warmer' conservatism was part of a long process that can be traced back to the late 1990s and the recognition that 'to win again, the Conservatives would have to change the way they communicated, the way they did business, the language they used, and the way they were.' (d'Ancona, 2013: 14).

The extent to which the Conservatives thought of 'progressive conservatism' as a counter-intuitive departure from the recent past was made clear by George Osborne in a speech later the same year. Also addressing Demos, he opened with the words: 'The torch of progressive politics has been passed to a new generation of politicians – and those politicians are Conservatives' (Osborne 2009). Both speakers emphasised that they were in their opponents' political territory by justifying even their proposed 'conservative means' (decentralisation, strengthening civic society, economic growth and fiscal responsibility) with reference to centre-left politicians. Cameron quoted Alan Milburn (2009: 3) and Osborne called in 'politicians on the left from Bill Clinton to [...] Jean Chretien' to support his financial proposals (2009).

Both Cameron and Osborne were building on earlier work by Greg Clark and Jeremy Hunt, who had argued that although ‘it might seem paradoxical to claim the label “progressive” for a party of the political right’, it was now ‘time for a reassessment’. It was no longer enough for ‘progressive’ ‘simply to be used as an alternative word for left-wing’; instead ‘a dispassionate assessment [...] would now associate it with the Conservative Party’. This was based on a return to what they saw as the defining features of progressivism: ‘the party of idealism, of social justice, impatience with the *status quo* and optimism for the future is now the Conservatives’ (2007a: 3-4).

II

The rhetoric of British politicians has recently begun to attract the attention of scholars. In particular, the work of James Martin, Alan Finlayson and Judi Atkins has both highlighted the importance of rhetorical practices to British party politics, and examined the effect of particular tropes in practice (Finlayson and Martin, 2008; Martin 2013; Atkins and Finlayson 2012). The early rhetoric of the 2010 Coalition has also been examined by Andrew S. Crines (2013), who has particularly emphasised the distinct roles of ethos (character), pathos (emotion) and logos (logic) in political speech.

In the case of the particular speeches and pamphlets discussed above, the – often explicit – aim was to reorient voters’ impressions of the Conservative Party’s ethos, to make its claims to be a moderate, modern, socially liberal party appear credible. This was bolstered by an emotional tone more usually associated with the centre-left: the idealism, concern for social justice, radicalism and optimism noted by Clark and Hunt. This approach had been apparent since Cameron’s first speech as party leader, with its claim to be ‘optimistic about human nature’ and his appeal to the party to ‘let sunshine win the day’ (2006). Yet the logic of all their arguments remained firmly conservative. Indeed, they asserted that the problems that had beset previous attempts at progressive politics could *only* be overcome through an application of Conservative reasoning.

The way in which this conservative logos was reconciled with a seemingly progressive ethos and pathos can best be understood as an example of the rhetorical practice of paradiastole (Skinner, 2002: 183-5; Finlayson and Martin, 2008: 452). Conservative speakers sought to adjust their audience's perceptions of 'progressive' from a centre-left moral quality, to one that was exclusively connected with Conservative values. First they opened out the term to encompass conservatism – which it had previously been seen to exclude. This depended on showing that the same 'progressive ends' motivated politicians 'right across the mainstream political spectrum' (Cameron, 2009: 2). They then sought to redefine 'progressive' as a Conservative quality, asserting that only their means were capable of achieving its ends. Finally, they attempted to exclude from the category of 'progressive' anything which did not conform to this new definition, arguing that Labour had 'abandoned the field of progressive politics' on account of its 'illiberalism, centralisation, fiscal incontinence and opposition to meaningful public service reform' (Osborne, 2009).

This rhetorical manoeuvre was not lost on their political opponents. Gordon Brown tried to re-establish what he saw as the timeless moral distinction between 'Left and Right, Labour and Tory, progressive and conservative' (Brown, 2010: 5), while Nick Clegg argued that the Conservatives' 'claim to the progressive mantle rings hollow' and noted that the words "progressive conservatism" [...] contradict one another' (Clegg, 2009: cover; 13).

However, the contention of this article is that both the Conservatives' attempts at paradiastole and their opponents' resistance to it were misguided. Both depended upon a widely understood and accepted association between centre-left politics and progressivism, which could be subverted by the idea of 'progressive conservatism'. However, a public opinion survey undertaken in April 2012 by YouGov and the University of Nottingham demonstrates that this is not the case. While 'progressive' is widely regarded as a positive word, conveying a wide (and often contradictory) range of broadly attractive qualities

it does not have the political meaning often ascribed to it. The idea of 'progressive conservatism' might have seemed attractive to voters in that it indicated optimism and change. However, for the majority, it does not seem to have signified a shift to the left.

III

The 'progressive tradition' in British politics is generally seen to be rooted in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century alliance between 'new' or social liberalism and social democracy. Academic work recovering this tradition began in the early 1970s (Clarke 1971, 1974 and 1978; Freedman 1978 and 1989; Collini 1979; Blaazer 1992) and spread, via the work of David Marquand (1979, 1991 and 1999) into political discourse, underpinning the founding rhetoric of the Liberal-SDP Alliance and merger as well as New Labour (see Fielding and McHugh, 2003; Robinson, 2012: 122-47). This understanding of 'progressive' centres on its 'connotations of social justice, state intervention and [Liberal] alliance with Labour' (Clarke 1971, 398). In contemporary politics, the term hovers uneasily between referring to this particular Lib-Lab heritage and being something of a catch-all term for the left: a vague antonym of 'conservative', as Greg Clark and Jeremy Hunt complained (2007a: 3-4).

However, 'progressive' also has a temporal, as well as an ideological, meaning. And it is this aspect that bolsters its enduring appeal. Parliamentary time is inherently progressive; it presupposes constant development along a linear trajectory (Robinson, 2010; Smith, 1998: 151-2). To be progressive is therefore to be successful. It is to demonstrate the capacity to shape the future – or at least to anticipate it. The description of particular policies as 'progressive' carries the implication that they are inevitable; historical time moves on and we must move with it or be left behind. Those who do not progress can only decline.

However, these two aspects, the temporal and the ideological, do not necessarily point in the same direction, which is why George Orwell included 'progressive' in

his list of words – like ‘democracy’, ‘freedom’ and ‘patriotic’ - which have ‘several meanings which cannot be reconciled’ and so are ‘often used in a consciously dishonest way’ (1946: 959-60). There is no necessary correlation between either modernity or ongoing change and the politics of the centre-left. Indeed, there are strong indications that the idea of ‘progressive’ politics originated with economic – rather than social – liberalism. Within contemporary party politics, though, the two meanings have *appeared* to come together. The idea of political ‘modernisation’ is strongly associated with moving towards the centre-ground – especially if that means shedding ideological baggage. In the case of New Labour that went along with an embrace of the social liberal tradition (Blair, 1995), in the case of the Conservatives, it requires a liberal attitude on social, sexual and moral questions (Hayton, 2010) and a conciliatory approach to some of the totems of social democracy – particularly public services and the welfare state (Shorthouse and Stagg, 2013).

However, we should be wary of accepting such ideas at face value. Modernisation does not have to flow towards the centre. Indeed, as Greg Clark and Jeremy Hunt noted, Margaret Thatcher’s belief in progress and impatience with the status quo could be seen as progressive characteristics (2007a: 16). Thatcher herself sought to use the language of progress, as Philip Begley demonstrates in his contribution to this symposium, challenging the idea that progress was intrinsically bound up with ‘the Socialist, corporatist, collectivist way of doing things’ (1978). Conversely, as Buckler and Dolowitz have noted, Cameron’s invocation of ‘progressive conservatism’ suggested to many backbenchers that he was aiming to go backwards, to regress to the values of the pre-Thatcherite ‘wets’ (2012).

Certain voices within the Labour Party have also been trying to separate the idea of temporal progressivism from the general sense of centre-left values. Instead, they point out that the progressive tradition was only ever a particular, liberally inflected, strand within Labour’s thought. Maurice Glasman, in particular, has distinguished the labourist tradition of the ‘Common Good’ from intellectual

progressivism with its focus on universal liberal rights (2011: 24). Similarly, Jon Cruddas has condemned the way in which ‘modern progressives side with progress, often at the expense of human relationships, the ordinary and the parochial’ (2011: 141-2).

IV

While the meaning, validity and ownership of the term ‘progressive’ have been vigorously contested in recent political discourse (see for example Progress, 2010), this has appeared to be something of an internal conversation. It is not clear that these distinctions, nuances and associations mean much to anyone outside the political class. Indeed, it is possible that they were never intended to. Speeches to think tanks and party political pamphlets operate in something of a closed environment. They could be seen as coded or shorthand messages directed at journalists, by whom their intentions will hopefully be translated to the outside world. Yet, the ‘progressive conservatism project’ was part of a broader strategy of ‘love-bombing’ Liberal Democrat sympathisers (McGrath, 2009: 36) and was underpinned by articles written by leading Conservatives for the centre-left press (Cameron, 2010b; Clark and Hunt 2007b). Moreover, terms like ‘progressive’ are so well understood within the political class that they may be repeated by journalists with little attempt at translation or contextualisation (for instance, Daily Mail Reporter, 2010). It is not clear how far their original implications travel with them.

This was the starting point for this research. We wanted to test the ways in which ordinary members of the public understand both the word ‘progressive’ and the notion of ‘progressive politics’. In order to do this, we put a series of multiple choice and open-ended questions to a representative sample of 1,651 British adults. This was drawn from the YouGov panel of 400,000 registered members and was sampled and weighted in order to be representative of British adults as a whole in terms of gender, age, social grade, newspaper readership and party identification. Recent studies have shown that the biases inherent to

opt-in Internet surveys are small and tend to be outweighed by the larger sample sizes they allow (see Cutts et al, 2011: 423; Hill et al, 2007).

Members of the sample were sent the survey between 22 and 23 April 2012. Each respondent was able to take part only once. The timing of this obviously complicates our analysis. It is difficult to read public understandings of the political rhetoric of 2010 from the vantage point of 2012, particularly given the self-declared ‘progressive partnership’ of the coalition (Cameron, 2010a). Yet, despite these caveats, there is little in the survey results to suggest that respondents either held the established Lib-Lab reading of ‘progressive’ politics or that they believed the Conservatives to have moved towards those social democratic values. While this can only tell us what respondents thought in April 2012, the breadth of their answers must cast serious doubt upon the idea that ‘progressive’ politics has any settled or widely held meaning.

The survey questions were principally intended to unpick the different strands of ‘progressive’ political rhetoric – broadly ‘left-wing’, high-minded Liberal-left and ‘progressive conservative’. However, the inclusion of an open-ended question on respondents’ own definitions of ‘progressive’ politics enabled us to broaden the analysis beyond our own preconceptions. The answers to this question were coded inductively, and while they are too nebulous to be subjected to sustained quantitative analysis, they provide a particularly valuable indication of the range of meanings which voters attach to the idea of ‘progressive’ politics. The answers reveal a complex picture, clouded by uncertainty and contradiction and clearly demonstrate that the association of ‘progressive’ with centre-left politics does not travel very far outside Westminster.

V

When asked to define the term ‘progressive’ in their own words, we found a plurality (37%) of respondents simply didn’t know, or weren’t prepared to say,

what it meant (Fig. 1). Of the remaining 1,084 answers, 317 (18% of the total) spoke of a rather general sense of forward thinking, modernity and movement towards the future. A further 201 (12%) indicated that this should be improvement or change for the better but went no further towards specifics and another 73 (4%) defined it in terms of innovation.



Figure 1: 'Sometimes in politics people talk about things being 'progressive'. In your own words, how would you define the term 'progressive'?' YouGov, 2012

Given that a political context was mentioned in the rubric, it is striking how few answers were explicitly political or ideological. For instance, only seventeen respondents (1% of the total) used the word 'liberal' – and of those two were negative:

wishy-washy liberal politics

too liberal. anything goes policies, especially for minority groups and wastin g precious government time on ridiculous things such as gay marriage when there is so much more of vital importance to be dealt with [sic]

Four respondents specified that it meant ‘not Conservative’, but another said that ‘In Conservative political terms it means change and streamlining to make cuts or make money for private enterprise.’ Two said that it meant ‘socialistic’ or ‘a new word for socialism’.

When the answers were coded, 72 (4%) could be categorised as relating to redistribution, social justice or left-politics. To put this in context, it was barely more than the 3% who gave cynical or anti-political answers such as: ‘Progressing their career’ or ‘progressively [*sic*] looking after rich thieves [*sic*] criminals immigrants mps police judges’. The association with left politics was stronger among Labour and Liberal Democrat voters – 6% and 7%, respectively - but still overshadowed by those saying they didn’t know or describing it in terms of being forward looking or modern.

A small number (15 individuals, 0.9%) defined ‘progressive’ in terms of private enterprise or capitalism. While this sample is too small to allow for meaningful analysis, it is comparable to that relating to Liberal politics. And the variety of answers is particularly interesting here. The fact that they are not all positive suggests that there is a connection here which transcends the tendency to describe one’s own policy preferences as ‘progressive’.

Acting in a way that improves the economy by investing in it

Being able to provide the same level of service for less cost.

privatising what they can for maximum profit whilst ignoring what services are left

Modernising work practices and realising we are in a competitive world.
Training of young people who want to work must be improved and the "benefit" system must be re-appraised.

double speak for capitalism

This is a theme to which we will return below.

VI

Question 2 presented respondents with a series of twenty-three political and public figures, institutions and political parties and asked them to say whether or not they would consider each to be progressive. In addition to key politicians from the three main parties, the political figures were Alex Salmond, Shami Chakrabati and George Galloway. The institutions were the three main political parties, the BBC, the EU, the trades unions and the royal family. The final three figures were celebrities. This allowed us to gauge whether respondents primarily associated the word 'progressive' with a political context; and also whether it carried broad left/right connotations outside the formal political sphere. The three celebrities chosen – Jamie Oliver, Jeremy Clarkson, Stephen Fry – also enabled us to tease out the relationship between the political and temporal meanings of the term. For instance, Stephen Fry is socially and politically liberal but has a rather old-fashioned public image, whereas Jeremy Clarkson's views are often characterised as 'reactionary' (see for instance *Guardian*, 2011), yet he fronts a television programme dedicated to speed, technology and (literal) forward-movement.

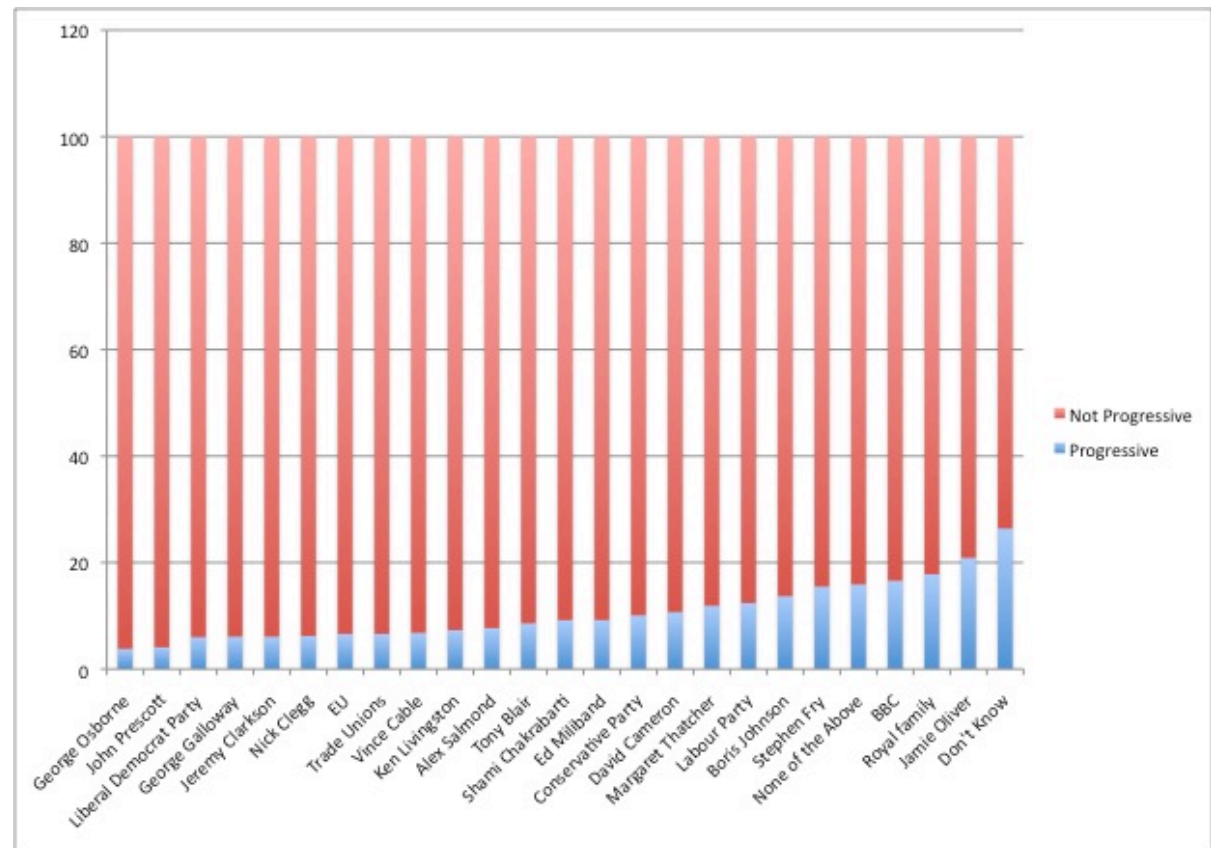


Figure 2: 'Which of the following would you say are progressive? Please tick all that apply', YouGov, 2012

First, it must be noted that none of the individuals or institutions were thought to be 'progressive' by more than 21% of our respondents (Fig. 2). Beyond this, the six most frequently chosen answers were all non-political – and included 'don't know' (26%) and 'none of the above' (16%). Jamie Oliver (21%) and Stephen Fry (16%) came above any politicians or political parties. This suggests that progressive is not felt to be exclusively, or even predominantly, a political term, although the low numbers (6%) describing Jeremy Clarkson as progressive, would tend to support the ideological over the temporal meaning. However, this story is complicated when we consider the royal family – which came third with 18%, but could not be described as either temporally or politically progressive by any standard definition. While there was a clear connection between voting Conservative and considering the royal family progressive (28%), it is striking that 17% of Labour voters and 13% of Liberal Democrat voters also made this judgement. Also, although those respondents

who said the royal family were progressive were much less likely than the average to have defined 'progressive' in terms of social justice or left politics (1% as against 4%), they were slightly *more* likely to associate it with being forward-thinking or modern (21% against 18%).

Given the connection between progressive politics, modernisation and the centre-ground, noted above, it is particularly interesting to look at the answers given by those respondents who had defined 'progressive' in terms of modernity, forward movement and the future in Question 1. Looking at Fig. 3, this connection perhaps holds up in terms of Labour politics, with the trades unions in particular less likely to be seen as 'progressive' by this group than by the sample as a whole. In the case of the Conservatives, however, the picture is more mixed. Given the extent to which 'progressive conservatism' has been framed as a move away from the legacy of Thatcherism, it is interesting to note that very slightly more survey respondents classified Thatcher as 'progressive' than Cameron (12% and 11% respectively). Among those who defined 'progressive' as forward/future/modern, the gap widened slightly to 16% and 14% and among those who defined it in relation to innovation it spread to 14% and 4%. Moreover, of the 181 respondents who said they considered David Cameron to be progressive, 42% said the same of Margaret Thatcher. It does not seem, then, that survey respondents were distinguishing between modernising 'progressive conservatives' and Thatcherites. Given Simon Griffiths' suggestion elsewhere in this volume that Cameron's progressivism is actually closer to Thatcherism than to the one nation conservative tradition, this is perhaps more insightful than it might appear.

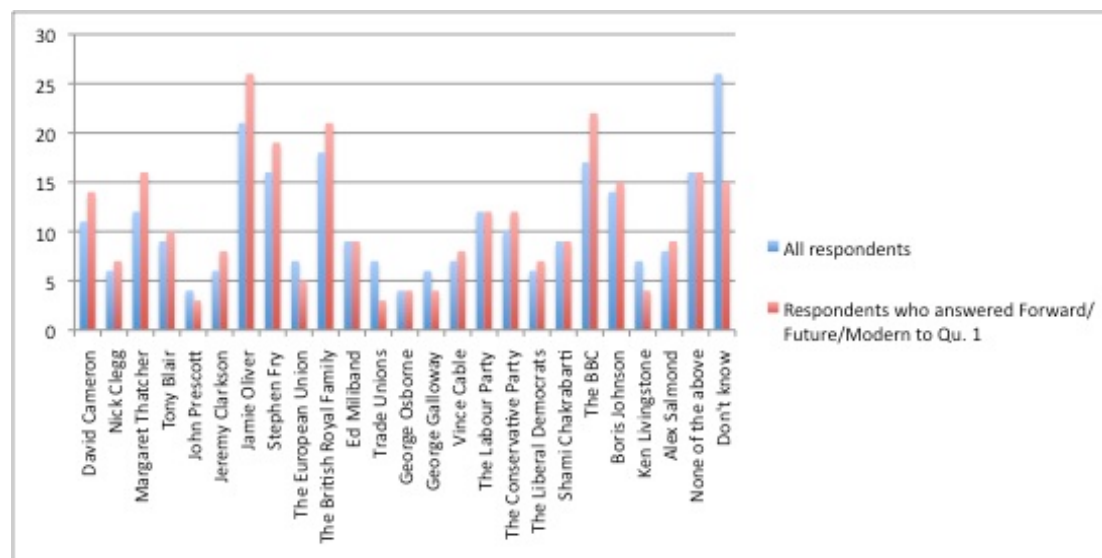


Figure 3: 'Which of the following would you say are progressive? Please tick all that apply', YouGov, 2012

Despite this, it was striking that the political figures judged most progressive were all Conservative: Boris Johnson (14%), followed by Margaret Thatcher (12%) and David Cameron (11%). Ed Miliband and Tony Blair trailed them with 9% each. The only Conservative politician to do badly was George Osborne with 4% (Fig. 2). This could perhaps be taken to indicate that David Cameron's rhetorical strategy worked, that two years after the election, Conservatives had cemented their 'progressive conservative' position. However, the poor showing for the Liberal Democrats (Vince Cable 7%; Nick Clegg 6%, Liberal Democrat Party 6%) casts doubt on this, as the progressive credentials of the Conservatives in office have been underpinned by the 'progressive partnership' of the coalition (Cameron, 2010a), described by Nick Clegg as the 'new progressives' of British politics (2010). Moreover, the Labour Party was considered the most progressive of the political parties (12%, with the Conservatives on 10%), and was the only party judged more progressive than any of its politicians.

This pattern is reminiscent of other polling data at the time, which put Labour (41%) ahead of the Conservatives (32%) but David Cameron (31%) ahead of Ed Miliband (22%). In both cases the Liberal Democrats (10%) and Nick Clegg (5%)

trailed far behind (YouGov/Sun 2012). It would seem then, that ‘progressive’ may simply mean ‘popular’. This suggestion is borne out by another YouGov poll undertaken in September 2012, which asked respondents to place their views of a number of political and public figures on a scale from ‘very favourable’ to ‘very unfavourable’ and also to rate each as ‘generally progressive’ or ‘generally not progressive’. Again, the most popular figures were also judged the most progressive (Fig. 4).

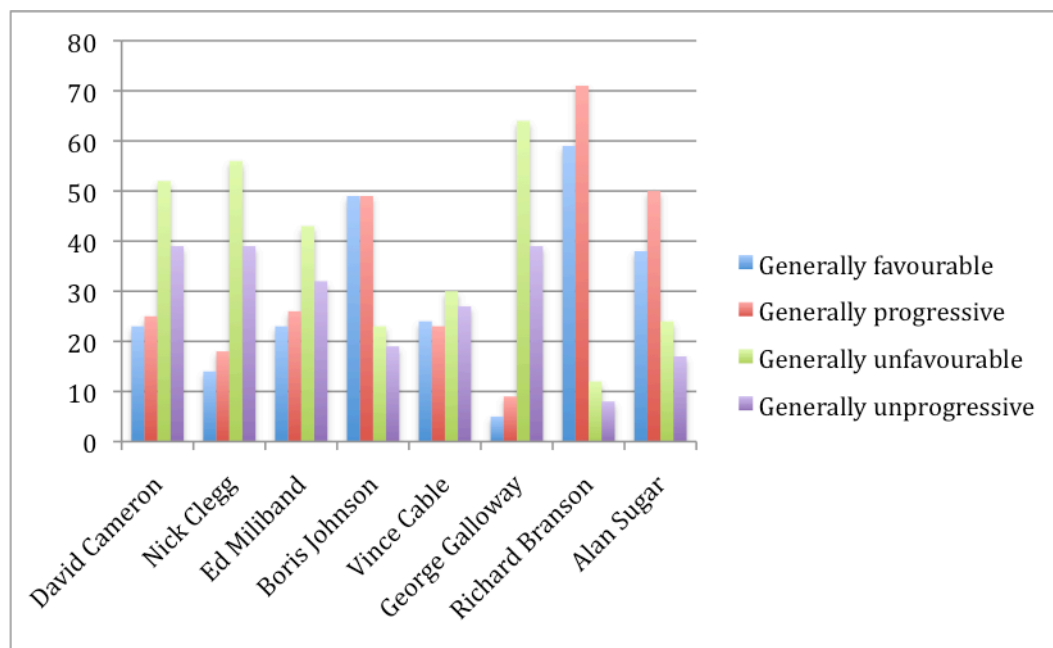


Figure 4: 'How favourable or unfavourable are you towards each of the following people?' and 'In general would you consider each of the following people to be progressive or not progressive?' YouGov/Cambridge 2012

This YouGov/Cambridge survey also supports our tentative suggestion that the public understanding of ‘progressive’ involves a leaning towards enterprise and business. Although respondents were more likely to label the key political figures as ‘not progressive’ than ‘progressive’ (with the major exception of Boris Johnson), 71% of respondents thought Richard Branson was progressive compared with just 8% who said he was not; Alan Sugar was judged progressive by 50% and not progressive by 17%. Again, this is likely to reflect popularity and success, rather than a particular understanding of the word ‘progressive’, but it does at least indicate that the two sets of values are thought to be compatible.

Moreover, the responses to our next question also showed an association between the words ‘progressive’ and ‘enterprising’.

VII

Question 3 asked respondents to select the three words or phrases they felt were most ‘progressive’ from a list of twelve. Again, the aim was to unpick the competing parts of the ‘progressive tradition’ within political discourse. Therefore we laid particular emphasis on the intellectual Lib-Lab tradition, associated with political reform and human rights on the positive side, elitism on the negative and political correctness on both. We tried to get at broader left ideas by including ‘solidarity’ and at ideas of state intervention with ‘bureaucracy’ and ‘nanny statism’. We also included ‘moderate’ and ‘radical’ as opinions on this seem to be very mixed – again reflecting the competing uses of ‘progressive’ within political discourse. The possible answers were balanced between those with broadly positive and broadly negative associations and it is noticeable that ‘progressive’ was felt to be much more strongly associated with positive phrases.

Unsurprisingly, ‘political reform’ and ‘social improvement’ came top (Fig. 5). However, on their own, these answers do not help us to differentiate between different political understandings of the term ‘progressive’. It is unclear, for example, whether respondents felt that progressive social improvement might involve ‘the state seeking to provide for vulnerable people, and to redistribute wealth and power’ or whether it would ‘sort out the people who are having benefits [*sic*] and should not be [...] get them off or give them menial [*sic*] jobs to do for their money’ (answers given to Qu. 1).

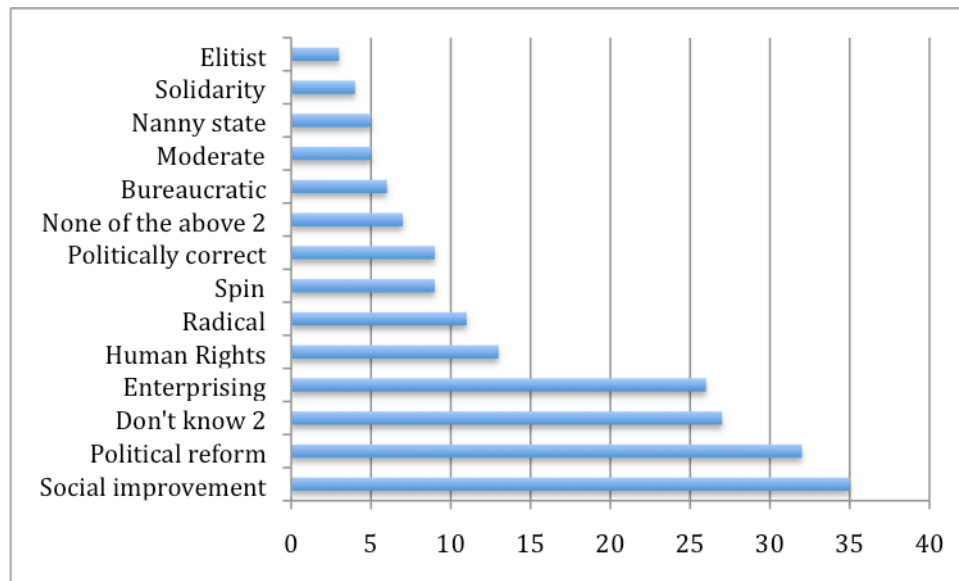


Figure 5: 'Which of the following words/phrases do you most associate with 'progressive' politics? Please tick up to three)'. YouGov, 2012

However when these results are broken down by political affiliation, the picture becomes much more revealing. If we look at current voting intentions, the percentage of Lib Dem voters choosing 'social improvement' is much closer to Conservative voters than to Labour (Fig. 6).

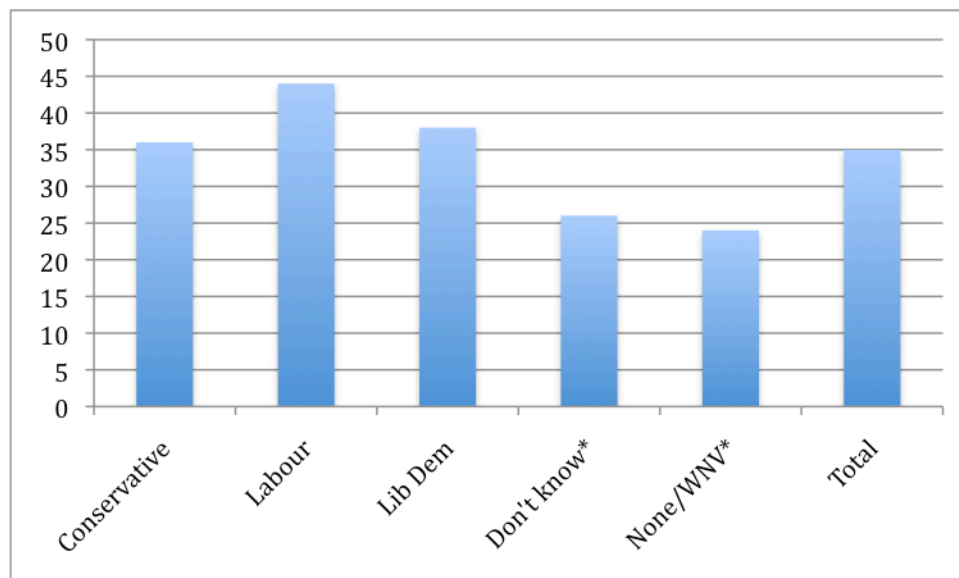


Figure 6: % selecting 'social improvement' as progressive (current voting intention). YouGov, 2012

Yet, if we look instead at party identification (which means we are looking at twice as many Liberal Democrats, and suggests that those who identify with the Liberal Democrats but are not currently intending to vote for them are opponents of the coalition), we can see that not only are the Lib Dem identifiers much closer to Labour, but that they have overtaken them (Fig. 7). Seeing 'social improvement' as 'progressive', then, appears to mark a fault-line between Liberal Democrat identifiers and those who would currently vote for the party.

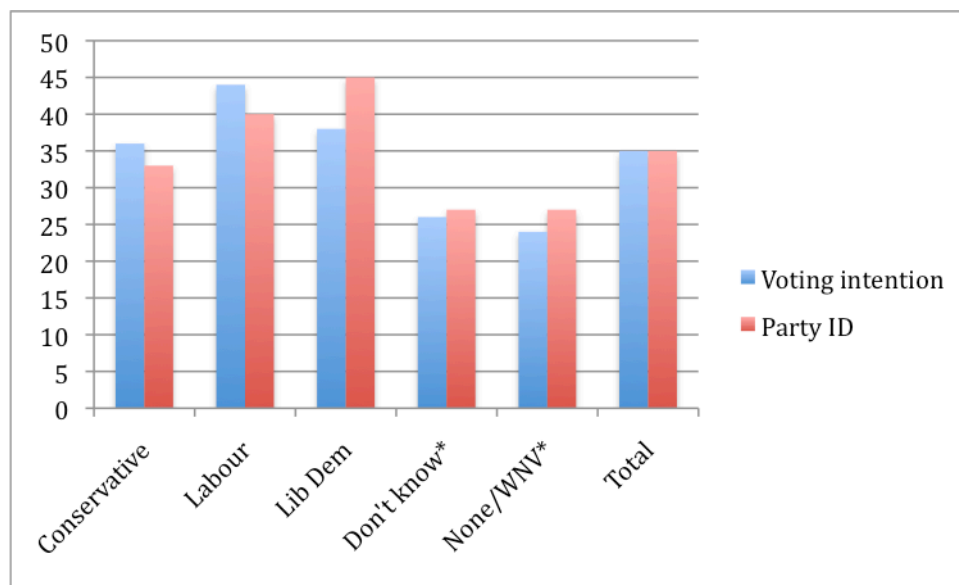


Figure 7: % selecting 'social improvement' as progressive (current voting intention & party ID). YouGov, 2012²

Turning to 'political reform', the percentage of respondents who see this as 'progressive' is noticeably higher among current Liberal Democrat voters than among party identifiers – 44% as against 38%. In this case, the current Liberal Democrat voters are the outliers – Labour and Conservative voters and identifiers are all in the mid-high 30s (Fig. 8).

² * The categories for 'don't know' and 'would not vote' were separated for voting intention but not for party identity. The same figures are therefore replicated in both columns in the results for party identity in figures 7, 8 and 9.

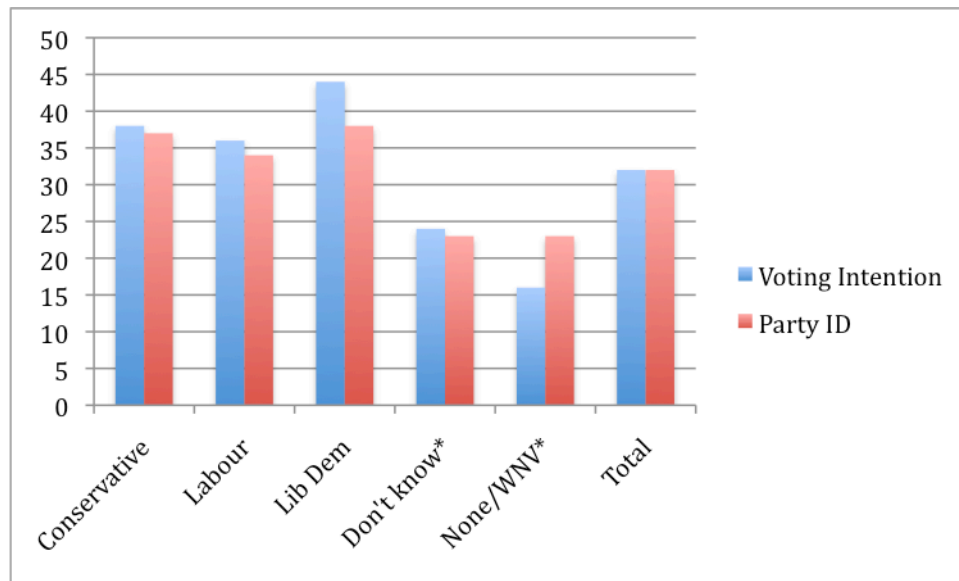


Figure 8: % selecting 'political reform' as progressive (current voting intention & party ID). YouGov, 2012

It is also worth examining the respondents who describing the word 'enterprising' as 'progressive'. This was the fourth most frequently chosen answer - after social improvement, political reform and 'don't know' – and was selected by twice as many respondents as next most common answer: 'human rights' (13%) and 6.5 times as many as the 4% who chose 'solidarity'. When this is broken down by voting intention, we can see it is something that unites Conservative and Liberal Democrat voters, above Labour and far above those who don't know or would not vote (Fig. 9). There is no marked difference between the percentages of Liberal Democrat voters (35%) and identifiers (32%) choosing 'enterprising'. There is nothing that unites those who would currently vote for Labour and the Liberal Democrats in the same way.

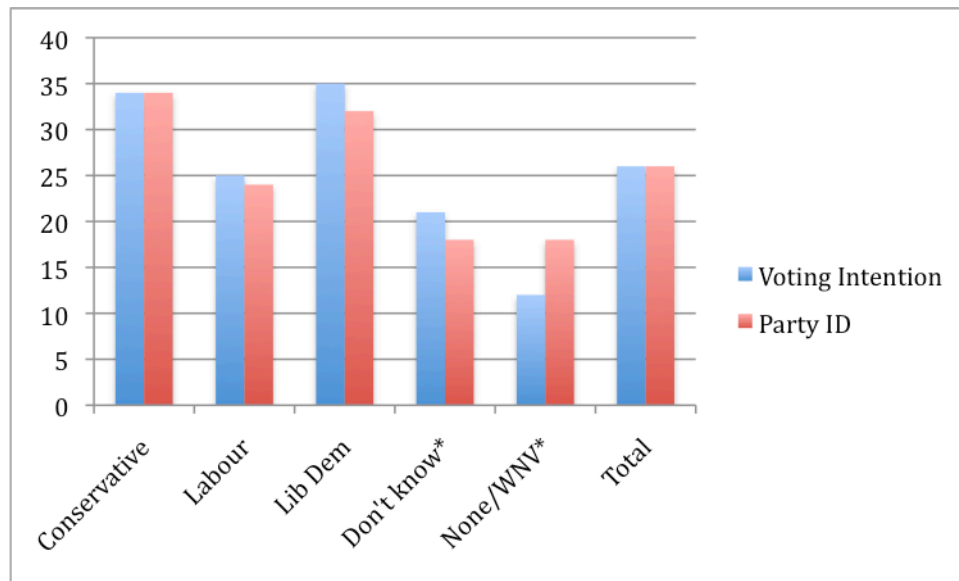


Figure 9: % selecting 'enterprise' as progressive (current voting intention & party ID), YouGov 2012

Moreover, to return to the results of Question 1, it is clear that those respondents who define 'progressive' in terms of modernity and forward movement were more likely than the sample as a whole to associate it with being 'enterprising' (Fig. 10).

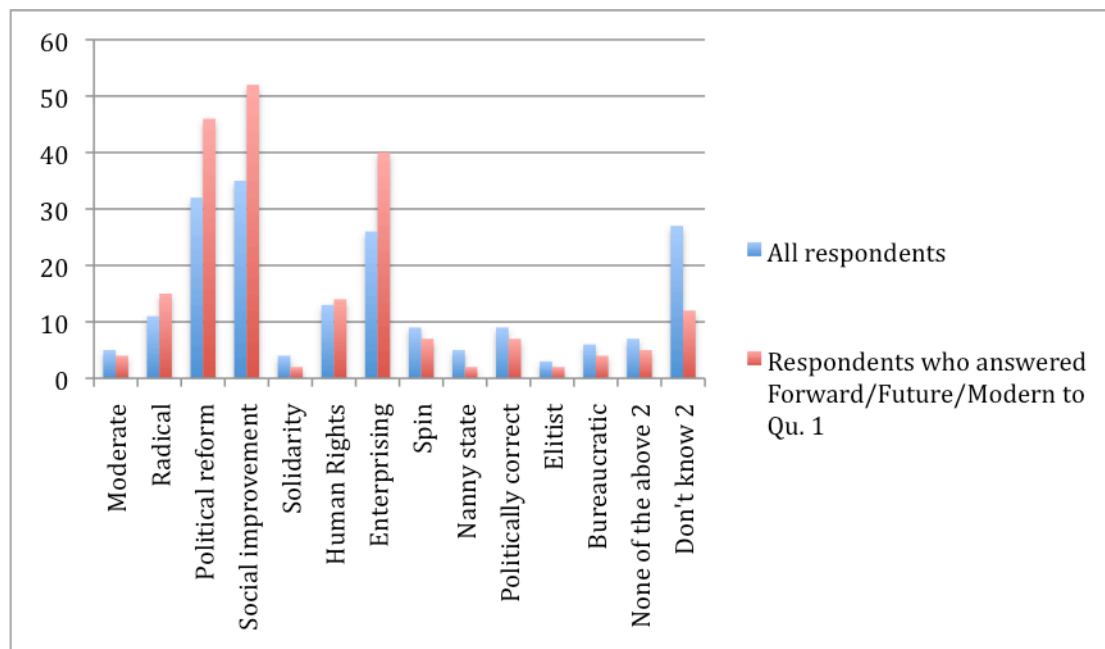


Figure 10: 'Which of the following words/phrases do you most associate with 'progressive' politics? Please tick up to three)'. YouGov 2012

VIII

These survey results are very surprising when examined in light of the Lib-Lab progressive tradition discussed both earlier in this article and elsewhere in this volume. They suggest that beyond a general and unspecified association with reform, improvement and change, 'progressive' may be as strongly associated with the values of the centre-right as the centre-left. This puts the claims of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition to be a 'progressive partnership' in a new light and suggests that it may have seemed more intuitive to the public than indicated by the convoluted rhetoric of its founders. Indeed, given the non-political sense of forward-movement which dominated the answers given to Question 1, Clegg's attempt to portray the coalition as 'new progressives' may have sounded simply tautologous to many (Clegg 2010).

Effective political rhetoric 'orients its audience' [...] by refiguring the situation' (Martin, 2013: 2), but this must depend upon a shared understanding of the words in which it is conducted. This is especially crucial where the rhetorical strategy involves reorienting perceptions of a particular word. While there is clearly a great deal more qualitative research to do in this area, our initial work demonstrates that the overriding political associations of the term 'progressive' – social justice, state intervention and Lib-Lab alliance – do not travel very far outside Westminster. They are not the dominant perceptions most people have of 'progressive politics'. Moreover, it suggests that the 'progressive conservatism project' failed to distance Cameron's conservatives from the legacy of Thatcherism. On the contrary, insofar as voters do associate the word 'progressive' with Conservative politicians, they often see Margaret Thatcher (and her emphasis on enterprise and innovation) as a key part of this.

Above all, the survey shows that most of us simply 'don't know' what progressive means. Despite this, a clear majority (57%) of survey respondents thought that being progressive was a 'good thing' – even though 23% of these respondents had previously said they didn't know what progressive meant. Even more

impressively, a plurality (41%) were prepared to describe *themselves* as progressive, with 19% of these having answered 'don't know' to Question 1. So while Cameron's attempt to subvert the popular understanding of progressive politics seems to have misfired, the repeated use of this term by all the political parties during the 2010 General Election campaign will not have done any of them any harm.

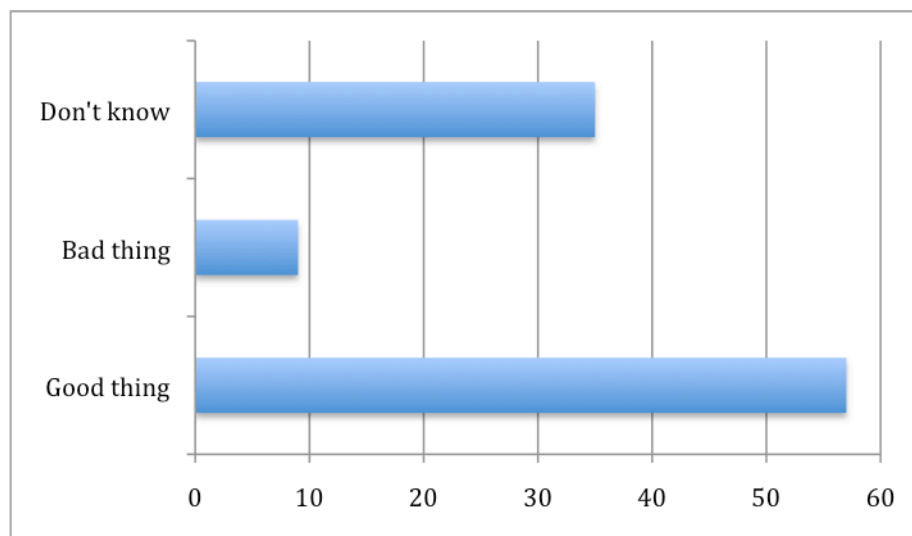


Figure 11: 'Generally speaking would you say being 'progressive' is a good thing or a bad thing?' YouGov, 2012

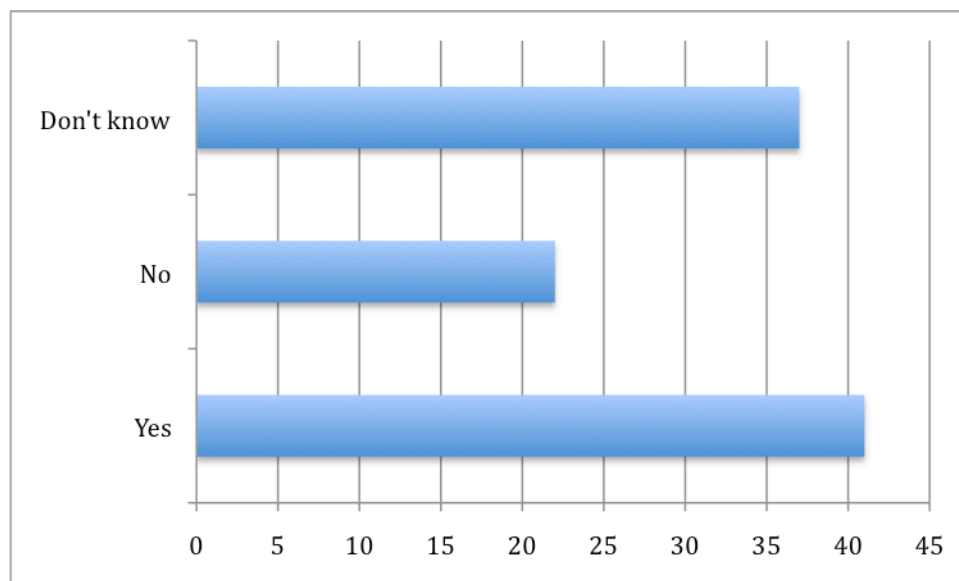


Figure 12: 'And generally speaking would you describe yourself as 'progressive''? YouGov, 2012

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